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Vol. I

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THE TWELVE OWLS; OR, THE SECRET BAND OF CHICAGO.

By PAUL BRADDON.



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THE 12 OWLS;

OR,

THE SECRET BAND OF CHICAGO.

By PAUL BRADDON.

Author of "The Unlucky Miner; or, The Rivals for Dead Man's Claim," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

BILLY HORTON IS BOUNCED.

"BILL! I say, Bill!"

"Sir."

"Come here, I want to see you."

"Right away, sir, as soon as I cover up this box of cut glass goblets."

"Never mind the box; I want to see you now."

"But the goblets?"

"Never mind those either. You are having entirely too much to say. Drop that hammer and come here to me."

Then Billy Horton obeyed.

Obedied because he had been taught to obey—not through any fear of Mr. Kennelly, the proprietor of the great Randolph street crockery establishment.

To be sure Billy worked for Mr. Kennelly.

He had been there two weeks and was to have three dollars a week, payable twice a month.

This was the second Saturday, and naturally enough Billy thought when he entered the office at the rear end of the store and found Mr. Kennelly and nearly every clerk in the establishment awaiting him, that the moment for receiving his long looked for earnings had come.

Mr. Kennelly was a little man, with a small, mean, pig-like eye.

As Billy entered he perceived the crockery merchant leaning against the desk, holding a copy of the Evening News in his hand, his little eyes winking and blinking, while Joe Henderson, Charley Fisher, Black Sam, the porter, and even crusty old Mr. Spriggs, the book-keeper, were staring at him as though he were some wild beast.

"What did you wish, sir?"

"Hem! Hem! Hem—hem!" replied Mr. Kennelly, seized with a sudden throat trouble which made his eyes blink the harder.

"Hem, hem, Master Horton, are you in the habit of telling lies?"

Billy colored up to the eyes.

"Whoever says so is a liar, and you may tell him so from me, Mr. Kennelly."

"Hem! William. Do not grow angry. No one has said so as yet. If you are convicted of the fault of falsification at all it will be by your own mouth—understand. Now then, did you or did you not inform me when I hired you that you were friendless, a stranger in Chicago, and, above all, that your father and mother were dead?"

"Mr. Kennelly, I—"

"Answer yes, or no, sir. Do not attempt to temporize with me, sir, for I won't have it—I won't have it, I say."

"You ask me so many questions all in a bunch that I don't know which to answer first."

"You are impudent, Horton."

To this Billy made no reply.

From the expression of the faces around him, he knew that something of greater importance was yet to come.

"Why don't you answer me?" thundered Mr. Kennelly.

"You don't give me a chance to speak. You want to do all the talking yourself."

"Answer, I say. Answer, boy, unless you want me to kick you out of the store here and now."

"You have no right to do anything of the sort, and unless you want to get hurt, you'd better not try it. You'll find that I can kick too, Mr. Kennelly, and, if size of legs goes for anything, quite as hard as yourself."

There was a general titter. It happened that Mr. Kennelly's legs were particularly slim ones, and, as he persisted in wearing the tightest kind of trousers, resembled closely a pair of animated pipe-stems.

Old Kennelly's legs were a standing joke in the store.

As Mr. Kennelly was not aware of this, it could hardly be expected that he should be able to see just where the laugh came in.

"Who laughed?" he demanded, facing about suddenly.

None but the most solemn countenances met his gaze.

"I advise all present to be careful," he snarled. "This is a serious matter, and no subject for hilarity. If any one laughs again there's going to be trouble. Billy Horton, do you propose to answer my question or not?"

"I don't know what your question is, sir."

"Yes, you do. You are not a fool, and it is no use to try to make yourself out one. Didn't you tell me your father was dead?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was it the truth?"

"Of course it was. I don't tell lies."

"You don't, hey? Then what, may I ask, is the meaning of this?"

Mr. Kennelly thrust the newspaper into Billy's hand.

There was a certain paragraph in the paper around which some one had drawn a ring with a blue lead pencil.

Billy Horton read the paragraph.

His face assumed a puzzled expression.

It was not a self-conscious expression.

It was certainly not a guilty one.

It was simply the expression of a person who had read something they failed to comprehend.

The paragraph was brief.

It read as follows:

"ESCAPE OF A NOTED COUNTERFEITER.—Last night, shortly after one o'clock, Herbert Horton, the noted counterfeiter, serving a twenty years sentence in the Joliet State Prison, managed to effect his escape by sawing away the bars of his cell window."

"Horton, it will be remembered, was one of the gang which flooded Chicago with counterfeit postal currency seventeen years ago. Had he remained quiet his sentence would have been up in another year, allowing for the usual deduction of time for good behavior. As it is, he will probably have to do additional time for jail breaking, for the detectives are on his track, and are bound to run him down.

"We understand that Horton has a son in the employ of Tobias Kennelly & Co., of this city. His wife, it will be recalled, fell dead in the court room at the time of his conviction. What became of his other son, for there were two, was never known."

"What do you say to that?" demanded Mr. Kennelly, as the paper, which was a week old, fell from Billy's nerveless hand.

Now, as a matter of fact, Billy did not know what to say.

It was all a revelation to him, and a startling one.

Not only had he until that moment been in total ignorance concerning his parentage, but he never knew that he had had a brother, and what was more did not believe it now.

"Why don't you answer me?" cried the crockery merchant, savagely. "When you applied for work at my store you told me you were an orphan—it seems you lied."

"No, I didn't, Mr. Kennelly. I told you what I believed to be true—what I believe now."

"Do you mean to insinuate that the newspaper lies?"

"I do."

"Then you are a fool."

"Calling me a fool don't make me one."

"Did you never hear of this about your father before?"

"I told you when you engaged me that my father and mother were dead; that I was brought up down at Roodhouse, in this State, by a kind old lady, who had also died and left me friendless. Then I walked to Chicago and you engaged me. That's what I told you, and so far as I know, it is the truth."

"Hem! I don't believe it. How did these newspaper fellows know that I had engaged you if you are the stranger in the city you pretend to be?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you, sir."

"You mean you won't tell me. Look here, young man, you have brought my name into the papers in a disreputable connection. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"I don't care what you do."

"You don't, hey? Well, I'll soon show you. Boy, you get!"

"What?"

"Get out. Leave my store. You're bounced. Do you understand?"

"Give me my money and I'll leave myself, Mr. Kennelly," said Billy, proudly. "I shan't stay where I'm not wanted. If you will take a newspaper paragraph sooner than you'll take my word, I wouldn't work for you if you offered me forty dollars a week."

"You won't have the chance."

"I don't want it."

"What are you waiting for—why don't you go?"

"I want my money."

"Money, money! You impudent young rascal! You'll get no money here. You've disgraced my establishment and——"

"You may keep the money, Mr. Kennelly. I make you a present of it," interrupted the boy in a choking voice, tears filling his eyes as he spoke.

Then without giving the hard-hearted crockery dealer opportunity to speak again, Billy took his hat from its position on a peg behind him, and strode proudly into the street.

Billy Horton had been bounced.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN WITH THE BOX.

WHEN it rains in Chicago it rains.

On this score let no one make the slightest mistake.

It comes down in torrents, and keeps coming down oftentimes for days together.

As it usually rains in the early fall and keeps it up about every day until snow flies, it is not at all surprising that it happened to be raining on the particular evening when Billy Horton found himself bounced from Mr. Kennelly's store.

It had begun the day before and had been raining ever since, and

now at half-past six the water was pouring down from the darkened heavens as though it never meant to stop.

Rather late hours for wholesale stores to keep open, did I hear some one remark?

Well, and so it is."

In any other city but Chicago, at half-past six in the evening, the doors of every wholesale establishment would have been closed for a good half hour at least.

They begin early in the great metropolis by the lakeside, and they keep it up late.

By half-past seven in the morning business is in full blast everywhere.

Clerks in wholesale establishments who get off at six are lucky—more remain hard at work until seven or eight.

Thus you see how hard Billy Horton had worked for his six dollars.

It seemed scandalous to think that after all he should have been cheated out of it—it did, indeed.

Still Billy did not murmur.

The fact was he had something else to think about.

The disclosures of the newspaper paragraph burned in his brain.

Was it true?

Was his father actually a counterfeiter—an escaped criminal?

Had he a brother somewhere upon the face of the earth?

Now Billy was a good, honest fellow, having been piously reared by the old lady down at Roodhouse, and this being the case it is no wonder that he felt himself covered with disgrace and shame.

So absorbed was he in these painful reflections that at first he didn't hear Charley Fisher when he came running after him, shouting:

"Horton! Oh, Horton!" behind his back.

"Thought I'd never make you hear," said Charley, all out of breath, as he drew his late associate at the crockery store under an awning out of the rain.

"What do you want?"

"Now, look here, Billy Horton, don't you get mad with me. I'm not as mean as old Kennelly even if I do work for him. I say he's treated you blamed shabby, but you needn't cry over it—you'd had to go anyhow—that's my belief."

Billy leaned back against the barber's pole on the corner of Clark and Randolph streets, and demanded of Charley Fisher what he meant.

"I mean that's a regular dodge of his. It's my opinion that he gave that about your being the son of Horton, the counterfeiter, to the News reporter himself."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Do you think Mr. Kennelly would do a thing like that?"

"Do I think? Well—but you don't know him. He's the meanest old hunk this side of Oshkosh. Why he's doing the same thing all the time. He'll hire any tramp who happens to come along——"

"Look here, I'm no tramp. Don't call me one."

Charley Fisher laughed.

"Don't get mad," he answered, "for I don't mean to be personal. I repeat he'll hire any one who happens to apply for work, keep them on until the time comes to pay them and then—whip! Way they go with the grand bounce."

"And without the money they may have earned?"

"Precisely. That's the way he got rich beating everybody. We fellows knew how 'twould be the moment he took you on. You needn't feel so bad about it. If it hadn't been this it would have been something else. I'd sue the old scoundrel if I were you."

"Sue him? Why, I'm nothing but a boy. If what you say is true how is it that he pays you, and Henderson, and the rest?"

"Now, look here; he's got to pay somebody, hasn't he? He's got to keep some one by him that knows the stock. If I could hear of another place I'd leave Kennelly so quick that it would make his head swim. Thought I'd tell you, so you needn't waste no time in worrying. What yer goin' to do?"

"Blest if I know."

"Got any cash?"

"Not a cent."

"Nor friends?"

"I don't know a soul in Chicago except my landlady and the folks in the store."

"You are in a bad fix for a fact. Will your landlady let you hang on till you find another place?"

"I don't think so. I owe her for two weeks, and promised to pay her to-night."

"How much does it amount to?"

"Two dollars."

Charley Fisher's round, good-humored face fell.

"Well, I can't spare that much," he said, "but here's a dollar for you if it will do any good. Give that to the old hen, and promise her the rest next week. You are as smart as they make 'em, and will be sure to catch on to something soon."

"But I don't like to take your dollar, Charley Fisher."

"What's the reason you don't? Wouldn't you do as much for me?"

"Perhaps I would."

"Of course you would. Don't be so squeamish. Now, looker here, do you see that big building on the opposite corner?"

"Yes."

"You know what it is?"

"A hotel, ain't it?"

"It's the Sherman House, one of the principal hotels in the city. You go over there and ask for Mr. Reade; he's the head porter and a neighbor of ours. Tell him I sent you and that he must give you a job. Do you understand?"

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it. If you get a job you can pay me back the dollar. If it don't happen to come convenient why never mind."

With this Charley Fisher was gone, leaving Bill to make the best of his way across the street in the drenching rain.

Did he feel relieved?

Well, perhaps he did.

It is refreshing to meet an unselfish person once in awhile, especially if that person proves to be a friend in need.

But just the same Billy could not bring himself to believe that Mr. Kennelly had made up that portion of the newspaper paragraph which concerned himself.

His mind was filled with it as he entered the Sherman House door.

Mr. Reade was out.

He had gone off for the day, it seemed, and would not return until eleven o'clock.

So Billy, having nowhere else to go, hung around the hotel until eleven o'clock came.

Now it only lacked an hour of midnight, and still no Mr. Reade.

"It's no use for you to wait any longer, bub," said the clerk behind the desk in the office when Billy inquired. "I've just had a dispatch from Reade. He's been delayed, and won't be back to-night. Look in to-morrow, say about nine, and you'll find him, I guess."

Billy Horton turned away, the thermometer of his spirits dropping a dozen degrees.

It was a bad business.

Never in the seventeen years of his life had the boy been in such a fix before.

Down in the country Billy had scarcely realized the value of money. Now that he found himself thrown upon his own resources in the great city of Chicago, alone and penniless, the bits of metal which move the world appeared to him in a very different light.

Billy was proud.

He hated the idea of owing any one.

Go back to his landlady in the West side lodging house without the wherewithal to redeem his promise he felt that he could not.

What was more he would not; no, not if he walked the streets all night in the rain.

Hungry, cold and thoroughly fatigued, Billy Horton left the Sherman House, and walked up Randolph street as far as the corner of La Salle.

Crossing that busy thoroughfare, at this late hour strangely quiet, he was in the act of passing a certain basement lager beer saloon, which we do not choose to particularize, when a man rushed up the steps and grasped him by the arm.

"Say, bub?"

"What do you want?" demanded Billy, drawing back.

He was startled by the suddenness of the man's action, and perhaps the more so since he now perceived four policemen moving past

the illuminated entrance to Hooley's theater, heading directly for the place where they stood.

Possibly the man saw them, too.

It seemed so to Billy.

At all events he grasped the boy's arm the tighter, and hurried him off up Randolph street, and around into an alley which runs between Fifth avenue and La Salle.

Free himself, Billy could not; and it is only the truth to say that he was considerably frightened, the more so since the man was a rough-looking customer with a bloated face, and breath smelling strongly of liquor.

Billy also noticed that while he grasped him with the right hand he held a small, but apparently very heavy, box, tied up in a newspaper in the left.

The alley once gained, the man seemed to breathe more freely.

Then, as he looked at Billy in the light of a street-lamp which burned at the entrance to the alley, he gave utterance to an exclamation of disgust.

"The mischief, I thought you were a messenger boy."

Billy's heart gave a leap.

Perhaps here was an opportunity to honestly earn money enough to settle with his landlady for the rent of his room.

"I'm not a messenger boy," he answered briskly, as the man released the hold on his arm, "but I can go of an errand if you want one done, all the same."

Again the man with the box surveyed him sharply.

"You look like an honest lad," he said, at length. "Can you keep a still tongue in your head if I trust you, do you think?"

"I've got as much as I can do to attend to my own business without talking about other people's."

"If I trust you with my errand and you talk about it I'll kill you."

"Better get some one else then—"

"No, I want you. I like your looks. If you do what I tell you, and do it just as I tell you, there'll be nothing lost. I'll give you five dollars to take this box to a certain place and bring me back a receipt for it—do you understand?"

"Yes, if that's all."

"It is all. Hark! Did you not hear a noise?"

"I heard nothing."

The man stepped to the entrance to the alley, thrust out his head, and for a moment remained listening.

Just then a horse-car on Randolph street went jingling by, but save for this there was no other sound.

"Do you want the job?" demanded the man, stealing back to Billy's side. "Be quick now—yes or no?"

"Yes, if that's all there is to it."

"Then take this box and get on a Randolph street car, go out to the end of the route, and then strike along Holroyde avenue until you come to the lime-kilns. You know where I mean?"

"No. I am a stranger in Chicago."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Good! That's so much the better. Well, you inquire at the stables for Holroyde avenue. Any one will show it to you. Follow the street to its end and you'll see the lime-kilns right before you. You couldn't miss your way if you tried."

"And after I get to the lime-kilns, what then?"

"Then you walk along the top of the bank at the edge of the quarry, and in a moment or so you will see a house standing alone by itself among some trees. There will be a light burning in the upper window, which will guide you toward it. Beside, it is the only house anywhere around."

"And when I get to the house?"

"Then you are to knock at the door. At first there will be no answer. Then you are to knock twice again—so."

And the man rapped upon the lid of the box twice in a peculiar way.

"When you have given the third knock," he continued, "some one will open the door. You will be asked this question: 'What flies by night and not by day?' to which you will answer: 'owls'. Then they will ask you, 'What owl?' and you will say, 'Jim sent me with this box, and he wants a receipt.' That is all."

For a moment Billy said nothing.

Just at that moment, too, the man thought he heard a suspicious noise at the end of the alley and went to see.

This gave Billy just what he wanted—time to think.

Should he undertake this errand or not?

There could be little doubt that the man was a criminal of some sort.

Even to a boy as inexperienced in city life as was Billy Horton, this seemed entirely plain.

Then again, was this any of his business?

Billy felt that so long as he remained ignorant of the contents of the box, confining himself strictly to the man's directions, no blame could be attached to him.

He wanted the money, and he resolved to earn it.

As he had often read in the Roodhouse "Clarion of Freedom," how country boys were fleeced by city sharps, he resolved to be very much on his guard.

If he asks me to leave my coat with him as security, "that will settle it," muttered Billy as he saw the man returning. "I'm not going to lug a box full of stones two miles and a half only to come back and find my coat stolen. I'll strike him for his five dollars now. If he forks over, well and good, if not, he can get some one else to carry his box."

By this time the man had returned.

"You had better go out by the other end of the alley on Washington street," he said. "You can come round into Randolph street again by the way of Fifth avenue."

"Why not take the car right here on Randolph street?"

"Because I had rather you would do it my way if it is all the same to you. It can make no difference so long as you get your pay."

"But how do I know that I'll ever get my pay? I don't know you, mister, and—"

"And you have an idea that there is something suspicious about my way of doing business. Well, upon my word, bub, there are no flies on you if you are a country boy. What do you want? To have me pay you in advance?"

"I think you'd better. You might forget to meet me when I get back. Beside, it would be out of my way."

"How so?"

"I have a room on the west side. I shall not want to come away back here."

"That's reasonable enough. How much do you want?"

"You were talking about five dollars."

"Was I?"

"Yes."

"Well, now you mention it, so I was, but don't you think five dollars a pretty big price for a job like this?"

"You ought to know best—it was your own proposition. Night work always pays high, you know, and—what's the matter?"

What the man saw was the squad of policemen suddenly pass the entrance to the alley.

They did not look in, nor would they have discovered anything in particular if they had done so, for at the first glimpse of the blue coats under the street lamp, the man caught Billy by the coat-tail and pulled him down behind a great packing case near by.

"Hush! don't you breathe!" he whispered, adding after a moment: "Now they've gone. Here's your five dollars, boy, and here's the box. You won't go back on me, because if you do I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, at the same time thrusting a bill and the box into the boy's hands.

"You understand what you have got to do?"

"Yes."

"Then understand if you don't do it your life won't be worth a rush. Now run! Scoot! If you ever breathe a word of having met me to a living soul I'll wring your neck. You can just bet your sweet life on that!"

Billy, box in hand, ran through the alley in the direction of Washington street.

The man for a moment watched him.

Then sauntering in an unconcerned manner out of the alley disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

BILLY SEES A STRANGE BIRD.

By the time Billy Horton had boarded a Randolph street car at the corner of Fifth avenue, he began to feel somewhat ashamed of what he had done.

There could be no doubt that he had lent himself to some crooked scheme, and for the small sum of five dollars, too.

To be sure five dollars was a tremendous consideration to him just at that particular time, but as Billy was an honest fellow if ever there was one, his conscience had begun to trouble him more than he cared to admit.

Still, there was no help for it now.

The man was an ugly-looking customer.

It would never do to give him the opportunity of carrying out his threat.

"I'll just do as I agreed to, and no more," thought Billy. "When I get to the house if I am asked to do anything else I won't—that's all there is about it. I've a right to go of an errand for any one, I guess. So long as I don't know what is in the box it is no business of mine."

Billy now examined the box.

It was, as we have said, rather a large one, but by no means heavy.

Wrapped about it was a piece of brown paper which concealed it completely from view.

Then he fell to wondering what was in it, of course, coming to no satisfactory conclusion.

He was still wondering when the car reached Western avenue, and the conductor shouted:

"All out!"

They had reached the end of the route.

"Can you tell me how to get to Holroyde avenue?"

The man at the car stables was watering a pair of horses at a trough when Billy put the question, and he looked up staring with some surprise.

"Holroyde avenue?"

"That's what I said."

"What do you want to go to Holroyde avenue at this time of night for?"

"Does that make any difference?"

"Well, perhaps not. I suppose you mean to tell me it's none of my biz, and no more it ain't."

"Can you direct me to the street?"

"Of course I can. There it is, but there ain't no houses on it. Leastways there's only one out by the lime kilns, and you can't want to go there, and 'tain't on Holroyde avenue nuther—it's after you pass the end."

"Why not?"

"Because no one lives there in the first place; because it's a haunted house in the second. I wouldn't go to it alone at night for a thousand dollars. You can do as you please."

"I don't believe in ghosts, boss."

"No more did I till I seen one lookin' out of the front window of that house," answered the man. "Howsoever, as you say, it's no business of mine. So-long, bub. If you really are going to that house by the lime kilns, why look out for yourself. That's all I've got to say."

And evidently the man at the stables thought he had said enough, for he picked up the whiffletree by means of a great iron hook, drove his team through the open stable door, and disappeared.

It was still raining, though by no means as hard as it had been.

The streets, bad enough in all parts of Chicago, were here nothing but a bed of black mud.

It was anything but a pleasant undertaking to go slumping along through the mud and rain, but Billy, anxious to have done with his singular errand, started off bravely just the same.

Directly before him lay the track across the prairie, which had been pointed out as Holroyde avenue, and turning into it the boy plodded on.

Now he was in the open country, with no street lamps to guide him.

Far in the distance many lights twinkled, and Billy fell to wondering which could be the light he had been instructed to follow—the light belonging to the haunted house.

Not that Billy allowed the stableman's ghost story to in the least disturb him.

Not at all.

As he had said, he did not believe in ghosts.

What perplexed him most was the man's statement that the house was uninhabited.

He was a great deal more concerned in getting rid of his box.

Billy had not advanced far before he perceived on his left a vast excavation, a great stone quarry apparently, filled with burning fires.

From out of this columns of whitish smoke arose. The air was filled with the odor of burning lime.

"Those must be the lime-kilns," thought Billy, "and, by George, it is just as the man said. Here's the end of the street."

He had come up abruptly against a fence, which proved, indeed, to be the end of the avenue, since it separated it from a spur of the great lime quarries beyond.

On the other side of the fence there was a spur of the excavation a hundred feet deep at the very least.

To go further in this direction was manifestly impossible.

Billy looked about him.

Presently he perceived a narrow path leading along the edge of the quarries, close to the fence.

Looking off in the direction of the path he saw, at no great distance away, a light shining out from among a clump of trees.

"That must be the place," thought Billy. "Thank goodness, I'm almost at the end of this business, for I don't like it one bit."

He turned into the path and pushed ahead.

Presently the fence came to an end also—it had only been placed across the street line as a matter of precaution—and he now found himself walking on the very edge of the bank which overhung the quarry, a place so dangerous that one false step meant death.

"Upon my word I can't see what any one wants to live out here for?" thought Billy. "If I couldn't find a better spot to build a house on I wouldn't build any at all. But here I am at last; now to get rid of the box."

He had reached the mysterious house.

It was a peculiar place.

Whoever had built the house had put it right at the very edge of the bank above the lime quarries; or perhaps at the time of building the excavation had not then been made.

A grove of trees surrounded it, and outside the grove was a dilapidated fence, the gate connecting with the weedy walk which led to the front door, being not three feet from the edge of the bank.

At this gate the path ended, and Billy paused to look about him.

The house, which could be seen but indistinctly through the trees, was evidently an old one, and half in ruins.

Its weather-boards had dropped off in many places, its chimney had fallen, the bricks which had once comprised it lying scattered about the path.

There were many windows, those on the lower story being concealed behind heavy green shutters, the ones above dark with the exception of a certain window directly above a crumbling piazza, up the pillars of which a sickly vine of some sort was trying to force its way.

In this window a light burned dimly behind a drawn curtain, revealing nothing of what was behind.

As there could be no doubt about this being the destination of the box, Billy took hold of the gate and was about to open it when something occurred which caused him to start abruptly back.

It was a tremendous crash.

It seemed to come from behind him.

As he turned to ascertain the cause of the sound, great masses of dust rose from the excavation and filled the air.

"Great Scott! What was that?" breathed the boy.

Then, as he looked, he became convinced that some heavy mass of rock must have loosened itself from the bank, toppling over into the quarry below.

It was all over in an instant, but in that instant Billy Horton, when he came to turn his eyes in the direction of the house again, saw that the light in the upper window had disappeared.

What could this mean?

The place was so horribly desolate that even the light had afforded him some comfort, for while it burned he felt that there must be some living thing near him.

Now it was gone.

Just then the rain began to fall in torrents again, and the wind soughed mournfully among the trees.

Billy grasped the gate once more.

But a moment would suffice now to enable him to complete his errand, and——

"Too-hoot! Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-hoot! Too-hoo!"

It was a fearful sound above and before him which now rang out upon the midnight air.

It caused Billy Horton to pause again.

It caused him also to look upward toward the house, where he beheld a sight which seemed to turn every drop of blood in his veins to ice.

There above him, apparently perched upon the ledge of the window from which the light had shown, was an enormous owl—an owl as big as a full grown man, which flapped its wings, at the same time sending forth dismal hoots to break the stillness of the surrounding scene.

Terrified now beyond all measure and scarce knowing what he did, Billy dropped the box and sprang backward.

In so doing he trod too near the edge of the bank.

Then to his horror he felt the earth giving way beneath him.

"Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-hoo!" shrieked the gigantic owl on the window ledge.

Its shrieks fell upon empty air, however, for ground upon which Billy Horton just now stood had vanished.

And Billy?

Was he at that moment lying dead or mangled upon the broken masses of lime stone at the bottom of the quarry below?

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN THE CAVE.

"ADVANCE one step and I'll put a ball through you! Don't dare to move until you have told me who you are!"

That's what the man in the cave said as he rushed upon Billy Horton, pistol in hand.

Then Billy Horton was not dead?

By no means.

To kill off our hero in the third chapter would not only spoil our story, but would be manifestly absurd.

Beside, how could we do so, when nothing of the sort happened.

Interesting or not, we must state facts, for this story happens to be true.

When Billy Horton felt the ground give way beneath him, he knew that he had put his foot in it, so to speak.

Perhaps he might have given utterance to one soul-stirring cry had there been time to do so.

But there wasn't; besides, Billy was not one of the crying kind.

He was falling, and he thought in that awful moment, as far as he thought of anything, that he was falling to his death.

Just there he was wrong.

All at once his body landed on a smooth projecting ledge of rock thrust out from the side of the lime quarry, not ten feet below the bank.

For an instant Billy lay there half insensible.

Then as power of action returned, he scrambled to his feet, astonished to see directly in front of him the entrance to a cave extending back into the lime stone to the distance of twenty feet or more.

Now Billy was enabled to judge of the depth of the cave for the reason that a fire burned inside.

Over the fire crouched a man, who seemed to have been attempting to toast a piece of meat on the end of a fork at the moment of Billy's fall.

He was an old man, with long white hair and snowy beard, his clothes being tattered and torn.

At the noise upon the ledge outside the cave, he dropped the fork and drawing a revolver rushed upon Billy, uttering the words quoted above.

"Hold on! Don't shoot that thing!" shouted Billy. "You ought to know I didn't come here because I wanted to. Drop that pistol, I say!"

Instead of dropping the pistol the man sprang forward, and cover-

ing Billy's mouth with one hand, with the other dragged him into the cave.

"Just holler like that again and I'll blow your brains out!" he hissed.

"Who the mischief are you, anyhow? What do you mean by prowling about this place?"

"I wasn't prowling."

"Yes, you were."

"I say I wasn't."

"Then how came you here?"

"The bank caved in and I dropped. You ought to be able to understand that without asking me."

"Boy, don't be sassy, or I'll blow your brains out anyway."

"You'd better not try it."

"I will most certainly try it if you don't give a satisfactory account of yourself. What's your name?"

"Billy Horton."

"What!"

"Billy Horton. Are you deaf?"

The pistol dropped from the man's hand, and fell ringing to the floor of the cave.

It was Billy's chance, and he leaped forward to avail himself of it, but before he had reached the spot where the pistol lay the man had covered it with his foot.

"Hold on, boy!" he said in a husky voice, "I am not going to hurt you. Just tell me your name again."

"I've told you twice. It's Billy Horton. If you don't want my company just show me how to get out of this, and I'll leave mighty sudden. I didn't come here of my own accord, and I don't want to stay any longer than I can help."

"Where are you from?"

"Chicago, of course."

"No, no. Where do you belong—where were you born and raised?"

"I can't tell you where I was born. I was raised down in Rood-house, this State."

"I thought so, I thought so!" muttered the old man, hollowly.

Then, strangely enough, he sat down upon an old piece of carpet spread upon the floor of the cave and stared at Billy without speaking at all.

Billy watched the old man curiously.

If he could have done so he would have instantly left.

This, however, was an impossibility, unless he wanted to jump off the ledge and dash his brains out on the rocks below.

Presently the old man spoke again.

Now his voice had altered, losing all its former harshness. There was also a suspicious moisture about his eyes.

"My boy, are you hurt?"

"No, I guess not."

"It was a terrible fall. If you had missed the ledge, I shudder to think of what might have been the result."

"I didn't miss the ledge, it seems."

"No, and I am thankful for it. How came you to be on the bank when it caved in? Surely you were not entering or leaving the house in the grove?"

"I was about to enter it."

"You were? Oh, heaven! but this is terrible!"

"What makes you say that?"

"No matter. Answer me—do you know the people who live in that house?"

"No, nor do I want to, if the one I saw was any sample."

"The one you saw?"

"That's what I said."

"Then you were inside?"

"No, I wasn't."

"The man came to the door?"

"Not that either. I did not say it was a man."

"A woman, then?"

"No, nor a woman."

"What, then—a child?"

"A child! If that was a young one I never want to see an old one the same breed. It looked to me like a bird, and about the biggest I ever saw."

"Describe it."

"Well, it had a head like an owl, with staring eyes and great, flapping wings. You just ought to have heard the noise it made."

"That house has the reputation of being haunted, young man."

"So I'm told."

"Perhaps what you saw was a ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Don't you? I do. There are other sorts of ghosts besides such as wander about at midnight dressed in white sheets and clanking chains."

"What kind do you refer to?"

"Oh, there are several sorts which have actual existence. There's the ghost of a man's past for instance."

"I don't think I fully understand you. The thing I saw on the window ledge of the house in the grove can have nothing to do with my past."

"Don't be too sure. But let us change the subject. Since you have dropped in on me so unceremoniously, you must stay and dine, or we'll call it supper, if that will suit you better. Now then, while I finish broiling this steak I want you to tell me how you happened to have business with the people at the house in the grove."

Thus saying, the old man picked up the fork to which the piece of meat was attached, and squatting before the fire held it out into the flames.

Billy was puzzled, disgusted, perplexed.

There was the box he had undertaken to deliver at the house in the grove lying upon the bank above him.

If he could only get back upon the bank, secure the box and deliver it, Billy felt that double quick would be no name for the speed he would make in getting away from this undesirable neighborhood.

Still he knew that he ought to be more than thankful that he was where he was and alive.

The boy thought of that, too.

Was this ancient cave dweller a lunatic as well as the tramp he seemed?

At one moment Billy was inclined to think so, at another not.

But mad or sane here he was, and being here must know of some means of getting out.

"If I don't answer his questions he may shoot me," thought the boy, "and if I stay dawdling here until somebody steals the box that fellow down in Randolph street will be after me, sure."

And realizing just how tight his fix really was, Billy decided that the best plan would be to humor the old fellow and persuade him to show him the way out of the cave.

Accordingly he told him all about it, beginning with his meeting the man in Randolph street down to the moment when the gigantic owl had appeared in the upper window of the house in the grove.

The old man listened with deep attention, turning the meat meditatively once in awhile.

"So that was the way of it, was it?" he said, when Billy at length became silent. "Strange that you should have been chosen of all the boys in Chicago to perform that errand, but no matter. What became of the box?"

"The box? Oh, I dropped it on the bank. I must go back and get it, mister. Show me the way, won't you? I'll promise never to tell a soul I saw you here, if you don't want any one to know."

"Yes, we must get the box," muttered the man, apparently not heeding Billy's remark. "We must get the box, and we must see what's in it. Perhaps—perhaps—Billy. You follow me."

Now, this seemed rather familiar on short acquaintance, but Billy being in no position to resent familiarities followed the old man, who had laid down the toasting-fork back into the cave without saying a word.

The way was not long.

Twenty feet, perhaps, would have covered it.

At the end of that distance they came to a flight of rude steps cut in the rock, leading upward.

The old man ascended these steps, Billy following.

Presently the rain drops struck upon his face with a pleasant sense of coolness, and looking about him Billy found that he had entered what appeared to be the remains of an old lime kiln, one side of which had fallen in.

In a moment they stood together upon the muddy prairie, within a stone's throw of the mysterious house.

"Now, then, where did you drop the box?" asked the old man, in a whisper.

"Over there by the gate," replied Billy, "but look here, mister, I can't allow you to open that box?"

"Perhaps I shan't ask your permission. Perhaps I shall not want to open it at all."

"That box was given me to deliver to the people in that house and I'm going to do it."

"Hush, hush! You talk too much. Show me where the box is."

"Why do you want to see it?"

"Because I'm your friend."

"My friend? Why, you never saw me until to-night. Why should you call yourself my friend?"

"No matter."

"But I want to know."

"Again I tell you to talk less. We can't tell who may be watching us. Know, boy, that yonder house is the meeting place of——"

"Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-h-o-o!"

From out of the little grove that same owl-like cry, which had so startled Billy Horton as to nearly cost him his life, was now suddenly heard again.

Instantly the old man grasped Billy by the wrist and drew him down beneath the shadow of the fence.

"What did I tell you?" he breathed. "Now hold your tongue as you value your life."

"Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-h-o-o!"

Again the hooting, accompanied by sounds resembling the flapping of a pair of enormous wings above their heads among the trees.

Though Billy strained his eyes in every direction he could see nothing.

Presently the hooting died away, and all was still.

"The box, now for the box," whispered the old man, after the lapse of some fifteen minutes, during which interval the hootings were not renewed.

There was something commanding about the man's manner that Billy found it impossible to resist.

Beside he had the pistol.

There was no telling at what instant he might be seized with the notion of using it.

Creeping along the damp grass the stranger advanced toward the gate.

Billy followed him.

Now the box was descried in the dim light lying close before them.

It was the box sure enough, but a great change had been wrought in it.

The side had burst open by the fall and upon the ground its contents lay scattered, soaking in the rain.

To the profound astonishment of Billy Horton the contents of the box had been money—simply money.

It lay in a little heap upon the damp grass beside the broken box.

There were packages upon packages of \$5, \$10, \$20—yes, and even \$100 bills.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOY IN THE BANK.

LEAVING our hero, Billy Horton, with the man in the cave staring at the piles of bills which had fallen from the broken box, let us transfer our attention for a brief space to the boy in the bank.

Not the bank of earth which overhung the lime quarries.

Oh, no. Not that at all.

It is the Butchers' Bank, on Madison street, just around the corner from State—that's the Bank we mean.

The boy was Joe Willshire.

The president of the Butchers' Bank was Mr. Jones.

Beside these, there was Susie Jones, the bank president's pretty daughter, with whom young Joe Willshire, who had been made paying teller at 19, was madly in love.

You see, we believe in doing up our introductions all at once.

It is always the best way; saves lots of trouble and many useless words.

That was Banker Jones' style, too; likewise the style of most Chicago business men.

When they have anything to say they say it.

At four o'clock in the afternoon on the day of which we write Banker Jones had something very particular to say to Joe Willshire, and he called him into the private office to say it and relieve his mind.

"Joe?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am going to discharge you."

"Mr. Jones!"

"Oh, you needn't exclaim as though you were so tremendously surprised."

"Mr. Jones, I am dazed—dumfounded!"

"You young rascal, how well you keep it up! Dear, dear, to think you should turn out so bad after all the favor I have shown you. If I did my duty I should send for the U. S. Marshal and have you arrested. As it is, I simply say go!"

"But Mr. Jones, I don't know what you mean, sir. It is a terrible thing to be accused in this fashion. At least you will tell me what I have done."

"You have deceived me, Joe Willshire—basely deceived me."

"In what way, sir? As God is my witness I am not conscious of ever having done you a wrong."

"Don't lie, Joe. That only makes matters worse."

"If any one else were to tell me I lied, I'd knock 'em down, but you, Mr. Jones——"

"But I am not afraid of your threats, boy, and I tell you so again. It's like father like son. I might have known it when I adopted you years ago. You come from bad stock, Joe Willshire, and blood will tell."

"Mr. Jones, if you have any sense of justice in you, you will tell me of what I am accused."

"As though you didn't know. However, I will tell you. Young man, you have been paying out counterfeit money from my bank. Stop, don't interrupt me. I know what I'm talking about. I've been watching you. You gave Huckston & Goss a bad twenty dollar bill yesterday. You gave Kohler & Snitz's young man a bad ten dollar bill the day before, and to-day you handed out a hundred dollars in counterfeit money to Harkaway & Howler's clerk."

"Mr. Jones, this is false!"

"Mister Willshire, it is true. I have investigated the matter, and I know. Oh, you young viper! How badly you have bitten the hand which warmed you! Do you see that door? Now you get out of it and never dare to show your face in my bank again!"

It was all over.

Maddened with rage and shame, Joe Willshire found himself standing in the street before the Butchers' Bank a moment later on.

He felt as though a cyclone had struck him.

Just what had happened he could hardly understand.

For be it known, reader, that this boy was innocent.

He was likewise proud, for a more honest fellow than Joe Willshire never lived.

Now as for history, so far as Joe Willshire was aware, he never had any.

He was the adopted son of Banker Jones, and had grown up in his house.

That much and no more he knew.

To be thus summarily kicked out was terrible.

The more so since it not only deprived him of a position and a home, but also of all chance of ever winning the hand of the girl he loved.

Would Susie Jones ever listen to him again after what had happened?

It was this thought which disturbed Joe Willshire most of all.

"Joe—Joe!"

He had turned into State street now, and some one was calling him from the window of a carriage which stood drawn up at the curb in front of Gossage's mammoth dry goods store.

That some one was Susie Jones.

Joe recognized her, and was at her side with a bound.

"Joe, has he done it?"

"Oh, Susie, I don't know what to say to you!"

"Then he has done it!" cried the girl, her beaming black eyes filling with tears as she choked back a sob. "He has done it, and I say it's a shame!"

"Susie, I am innocent. I declare to you I am innocent. This thing has come upon me like a thunderclap. Your father has accused me of paying out counterfeit money, and has turned me out of the bank."

"Joe, I know it. He told me this morning that he was going to do it. I begged him not to, for I believe it is a conspiracy against you. Where did you get those bills?"

"Susie, I declare to you that they were a part of the regular money of the bank. I have had no other. Good or bad, Carter, the receiving teller, took them in."

"I knew it!" cried the girl. "It is all George Carter's doings. You know, Joe, he is horribly jealous of you. He wanted to marry me and I refused him."

"I know it, Susie."

"He hates you, Joe."

"I know that too."

"Did you tell my father this?"

"He gave me no chance to tell him, Susie. I was so taken by surprise at the accusation he brought against me, that I didn't know what to say or do."

"Then I'll tell you what to do, Joe. I have been working for you ever since this morning."

"Susie, how can I ever thank you?"

"Don't talk of thanks, Joe. You know what we hope one day to be to each other. I have seen Mr. Pullen, the detective, and have told him all about it. He wants to see you right away."

"And where shall I find him, Susie?"

"At his house on Fulton street, near Western avenue. You had better go there at once. Meanwhile, I am going out on the West side to see a married friend whose husband knows all about George Carter's habits. I shall do all in my power to help you, Joe, and with God to help us both, we shall prove this terrible accusation which has been brought against you to be the false charge it really is."

She was gone.

Joe Willshire watched the carriage as it rolled up Madison street.

Then with all possible speed he hurried down State street, boarded a Randolph street car and started for the detective's house.

CHAPTER VI.

JOE WILLSHIRE ON THE WATCH.

"Young man, do you know who your father was?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"What do you know concerning your past history?"

"Nothing at all."

It was Joe Willshire and Mr. Pullen, the famous Chicago detective.

They were seated in the parlor of the latter's house on Fulton street, where they had been in close conversation for an hour or more.

Joe had told Mr. Pullen all about his dismissal from the bank; the detective had listened to his story, questioning him concerning his relations with George Carter in every possible way.

"It is a serious case," remarked Mr. Pullen, meditatively, as Joe's last answer was returned. "It looks like a conspiracy, and I am inclined to believe it is."

"I am afraid so, sir."

"And I am certain of it. Look here, young man, do you know that it is a very serious matter to have a charge of passing counterfeit money brought against you?"

"I suppose it is, sir."

"It is more so in your case than it would be with another."

"Why so, sir?"

"Have you stopped to consider what Mr. Jones meant by his remark that you came from bad stock by saying 'like father like son'?"

"I have been thinking of it ever since."

"And can make nothing of it?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then let me explain to you. Since Miss Susie called upon me this morning and engaged my services I have been looking up your past."

"And you find?"

"That your father was a notorious counterfeiter."

Joe shuddered.

"Can this be possible?" he breathed.

"Not only possible, but the actual truth. He was imprisoned many years ago for passing counterfeit money."

"I cannot realize it."

"You must bring your mind down to it. Your father was imprisoned, your mother fell dead in the court room at his sentence. You were with her at the time, also a younger brother—a mere infant. Much sympathy was shown by the spectators, which ended in your being adopted by Mr. Jones, and your brother by a kind-hearted old lady who lives, or did live, in the town of Roodhouse, in this state."

"And my father, Mr. Pullen?"

"Your father was sent to Joliet, where he remained in prison until last week."

"Last week! Then they have let him out?"

"He made his escape, my boy. The police are looking for him now."

"This is terrible!"

"It is very hard on you, but you must remember one thing."

"What is that?"

"There were those at the time who believed your father innocent."

"Innocent!"

"Yes, and the victim of a conspiracy like yourself."

"Do you believe this?"

"I believed it at the time, and I believe it now. I am satisfied that there is some secret band of counterfeiters at work here in Chicago, and that your father was their victim then, that they are seeking to make you their victim now."

Joe Willshire's face brightened.

"If we could only prove this and clear my father's name!" he vehemently exclaimed.

"Perhaps we can if we try, but you must help me."

"I'd give my life to do it."

"I am sure of it. You are a brave, honest fellow. But tell me—do you know your father's name?"

"Why, Willshire, I suppose."

"Not at all."

"What then?"

"His name is Horton—Herbert Horton, and the principal witness against him at his trial was one Alanson Carter, the father of George Carter, the receiving teller of the Butchers' Bank."

"Is this Alanson Carter living?"

"No, he is dead some years since. It looks very much as though his son were following in his evil ways."

"Then this secret band may still exist."

"I believe you. I haven't the least doubt that it has existed for years."

"And you think that George Carter is a member of it?"

"That's my idea. He's a thoroughly bad fellow. He drinks dreadfully, and gambles down at Mike Macdonald's on Clark street nearly every night."

"Surely Mr. Jones can't know this?"

"He ought to know it. I tried to tell him but he wouldn't listen to me. Why he actually told me that he intended to sanction George Carter's suit with his daughter—that pretty girl who thinks so much of you."

"George Carter shall never marry Susie Jones if I can prevent it."

"Bravely spoken. Perhaps you can prevent it. Now listen to my plan?"

"I am listening, Mr. Pullen."

"I have reason to believe that members of this secret band usually meet at a certain saloon on La Salle street somewhere around midnight."

"Very well."

"To-night at that hour, or very near it, a squad of police will visit the place."

"And in the meantime is there no work for me?"

"There is, plenty of it. You know the lime kilns out beyond Western avenue?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Do you happen to recall an old house which stands alone among some trees just at the top of the quarry bank?"

"I can't say I remember that."

"Perhaps not, but you will have no difficulty in finding it. Now, then, Joe Willshire, when you leave here I want you to go direct to

the lime kilns and watch that house. Stay there all night if necessary. Keep a close watch, and be ready to inform me who goes in or out."

"I'll do it, Mr. Pullen."

"The house has the reputation of being haunted."

"That don't scare me."

"Good. Then if you should happen to see figures in white at the windows, hear strange noises or see lights you'll not let that frighten you away."

"No, indeed."

"They are up to all sorts of tricks."

"Well, they can't play their tricks on me. Who is supposed to live in the house?"

"No one. It is supposed to be deserted, but for my part I believe nothing of the sort."

"You think it one of the meeting-places of the secret band?"

"I do. It remains for you to ascertain if I am right."

"You can depend upon me, Mr. Pullen."

With this promise on his lips Joe Willshire left the detective's house.

His first move was toward Randolph street where he ate supper at a humble restaurant.

His next was direct to the lime kilns and the mysterious house in the grove.

By the time he reached there it was raining.

It was also after eight o'clock.

Joe had talked a long while with the detective.

Hence the lapse of time.

As he approached the house it appeared to be deserted.

No light burned in any of the windows.

There was no sign of life within or without.

As it seemed to Joe Willshire's mind unwise to show himself too plainly, after a short reconnoissance, he began to look about him for a good place to maintain his watch upon the mysterious house without being seen himself.

That was the way he came to go into the old lime kiln.

Here he could watch the house, see everything without being discovered himself.

He also saw the stone steps leading down into the cave in the side of the quarry bank.

At another time Joe Willshire might have been tempted to explore them.

As it was now, so intently were his thoughts fixed upon the house, to do so never occurred to him at all.

Joe watched and waited.

For the first half hour nothing whatever occurred.

It must have been somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five minutes to nine when he heard the sound of carriage wheels.

They came splashing along through the mud on Holroyde avenue, the carriage halting at the strip of fence.

Joe was on the alert instantly.

Some one was coming and it remained with him to ascertain who that some one was.

Certainly the secret band, if one existed, had chosen a favorable spot for their meetings.

A place more utterly lonely it would have been hard to find.

Raising his head in such a manner that his eyes were just above the level of the wall which surrounded the ruined lime kiln, Joe peered out at the carriage.

Two men could be seen standing by it.

They appeared to be taking something out through the door.

Whatever that something was, it was certainly very large and very heavy.

With their burden between them, the men moved along the path in the direction of the mysterious house in the grove.

It was just as they were passing the lime kiln that Joe made the startling discovery.

To his utter horror, he perceived that one of the men was George Carter, while the other was the coachman in the employ of Banker Jones.

And their burden?

What was it?

Joe Willshire, peering over the edge of the lime kiln, all at once gave utterance to a cry of dismay.

He saw it now.

It was a woman's unconscious form which the two men were carrying into the house.

The face, which was turned toward him, was the face of Susie Jones, whom he loved better than life itself.

Prudence fled at the sight, and Joe Willshire sprang over the wall of the lime kiln and dashed toward the moving group.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTURED BY AN OWL.

"Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-hoo!"

At the very instant of the discovery of the packages of money lying upon the grass beside the broken box, that strange owl-like cry went up again.

The old man started to his feet.

"Ha, we are discovered!" he breathed. "Quick, boy, quick! those fiends are upon us. We must gain the cave as we value our lives."

"But this money," gasped Billy. "It was placed in my charge—I cannot leave it here."

"Don't stop to consider the money if you have any regard for yourself. It is counterfeit, every note of it, and can only bring you harm."

"Counterfeit!"

"I have said it. Will you come? You little know your danger. If I could only make you understand, I—oh, Heaven! I am shot! I am shot!"

"Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-hoo! Too-hoot! Too-h-o-o!" shrieked the owl, and with the shriek the sharp crack of a rifle broke upon the midnight air.

To Billy's utter consternation, with the rifle crack came the cry of his companion, and the old man, throwing up his hands, sank lifeless to the ground.

Now, under circumstances so terrifying, another less brave than Billy might have fled.

Not so our hero.

Expecting fully to receive a second charge himself, he nevertheless bent over the body of his strange companion, and sought to bear it toward the kiln.

Too late!

Scarce had he touched it when a slight noise behind him caused Billy to turn his head.

To his horror there rushed upon him the strange owl-like bird which he had seen perched upon the upper window ledge of the mysterious house.

It came with a rush and a terrific hooting.

It seemed to hop, rather than walk along the ground, flapping, as it approached, its terrible wings.

Billy stood staring—frozen to the earth.

To save him he could not move even so much as a hair's breadth.

But would flight have saved him!

It is doubtful.

Still no time was afforded him to try it.

Before he could shake off the feeling of lethargy, the owl was upon him, and had folded him in those terrible wings.

"Help! Help! Help!"

It was Billy's last effort.

Flap! Smack!

One blow of the owl's wing had knocked him senseless.

For some moments Billy Horton knew no more.

When consciousness returned Billy found himself in a pretty predicament.

He was lying upon some dirty boards, which seemed to form the floor of a cellar, his arms and legs tied, and a nasty tasting rag thrust into his mouth as a gag.

The cellar was almost dark, very damp and foul smelling.

What light there was came from a candle held in the hand of a young and fashionably dressed man.

"Well, and so you have come to your senses, have you?" this person demanded as he peered down upon the captive. "Who the mis-

chief are you anyhow, and what brought you prying about this house?"

Billy in reply shook his head mumbling.

He could not speak because of the gag.

The young man appeared to understand this, and removed it.

"Now tell it, you young cub—tell it!" he said, fiercely, "and see that you tell it straight!"

"I have nothing to tell. I was hired to bring that box up here, that's all there is to it. You'd better believe I wish I'd never undertaken the job."

"Is this the truth?"

"It is."

"Then a pretty mess you made of your business. Who hired you?"

"A man on Randolph street, near La Salle."

"What sort of a looking man?"

"I can't describe him very well. I only saw him in the dark. He told me to take the box to this house and say 'Jim' sent it, and bring back a receipt."

"Jim! Well, upon my word, I didn't think Jim was such a fool!"

"I think I was the fool to agree to do his errand. I didn't know it was going to get me into trouble like this."

"Perhaps it wouldn't if you had simply delivered the box. Then you would have never learned what was in it, and I might have let you go about your business. As it is I intend to serve you as I served your father. I've got the whole Horton breed on my hands to-night it seems."

Thus saying the young man retreated hurriedly, locking the door after him, and leaving Billy entirely in the dark.

He quite forgot to restore the gag if such had been his intention.

Nor did he observe that the cords which bound the hands of the supple boy were, when he bent his body forward, within reach of his teeth.

But Billy had noticed this.

The fact was Billy was almost double-jointed.

He could perform the most surprising antics with his arms and legs, and when standing upright could so bend his body as to almost touch his toes with his nose.

This was Billy's great accomplishment, and under the circumstances it was not at all likely that he was going to give it away.

No sooner had the man disappeared than he began to think.

Suppose he could free himself of his bonds—and he felt certain of his ability to do this—could he then hope to escape?

The room in which he was confined seemed, as near as he had been able to make out while the light lasted, to be only part of the entire cellar beneath the house.

Along the side opposite to where he lay ran a row of brick pillars with boarded-up spaces between.

Behind these boards the road to freedom might lie for all Billy knew.

What were the boy's thoughts during these awful moments?

This is a question hard to answer, and that's a fact.

He thought the old man from the cave had been killed, for one thing, and he began to wonder what his captor had meant by alluding to him as his father, and by saying that he had the "whole Horton family on his hands that night."

Be sure there was food for reflection in this which excited the brain of our hero to the highest pitch.

Could the man in the cave actually be his father, the escaped counterfeiter, hovering about the scene of his former crimes?

Oh, if he had only thought of this before, how differently he might have acted.

Then again, if he had been more prompt to obey, the old man, whether his father or not, might have escaped the fatal shot.

As for the giant owl which had captured him, Billy's thoughts were upon that subject, when all at once there came a knocking out in the darkness ahead.

At first the boy was startled.

It might be the young man coming back to put his threat into execution; it might be that the man from the cave still lived and was confined near him.

Thus thought Billy Horton, when—

"Rat—tat—tat! Rat—tat—tat!"

The knocking was heard again.

"Hello!" cried Billy.

"Hello yourself!" answered a voice from the darkness.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Want to get out of this blamed hole. Who are you?"

Strangely enough, the voice which answered Billy Horton sounded very much like his own.

"I am Billy Horton."

"Horton—Horton!" answered the voice. "Is Horton really your name?"

"It is, though I can't see anything so surprising about it. What's your name, and where are you, anyhow? If you are a prisoner like myself, perhaps if we could manage to put our heads together we might contrive some way to get out."

"I'm afraid it's going to be a hard job to get our heads together. I'm trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey."

"Well, and I'm not much better off; but, look here, I've told you my name, and now I want to know yours."

"I hardly know what it is myself."

"I don't understand you."

"Probably not. I thought my name was Willshire until this afternoon, but it seems I was mistaken."

"How did you come here?"

"I was captured by the counterfeiters, but it is too long a story to tell now. Is it dark in there?"

"Dark as a pocket, but don't let's talk any more just now. We have to call too loud and may be overheard. I'm going to try to set myself free."

"Then may good luck attend you, for the life of another than myself is at stake. I'll keep quiet now, but you must let me know how you are getting along."

Did he refer to the old man from the cave?

Billy wondered as he went to work on his bonds.

Now the boy's wonderful power of bending his body stood him in good stead.

His teeth were sharp, his desire to free himself sharper.

Billy went to work on the turn of the rope which he could bring nearest his teeth.

It took time, but what does not.

The game was certainly worth the candle.

In less than ten minutes Billy found himself free.

During those ten minutes the captive on the other side of the partition had not spoken.

It was just as well.

Had he indulged himself in this direction it is doubtful if Billy could have heard him for a thundering racket had begun.

Pounding, hammering, sawing, filing.

Sounds of some great piece of machinery working.

The dragging of heavy weights over the floor.

Then a groan was heard from the other side of the partition.

This was just as Billy found himself free.

"Hist! Hist! I have done it!" he whispered between the loosely-jointed boards of the partition.

"You have! You are actually free?"

"You bet I am, now then look out! Here they go! Rip! Slap! At 'em again!"

The partition, a rough thing at best, was not calculated to withstand such determined efforts as those put forth by Billy Horton now.

There was a ripping of boards and down it fell, the noise drowned to a certain extent by the sounds above.

"By George, but you have done it!" cried the voice from the darkness. "Here! This way! Here I am! Set me free, for goodness sake, I believe they are killing some one up-stairs."

Fortunately Billy had matches about him.

He lit one.

The place in which he found himself when the light of the burning match flared upward, was similar in every respect to the part of the cellar on the other side of the fallen partition.

Billy, however, did not pause to examine it.

He had other matters to think of just about that time.

Fancy his surprise when he beheld lying upon the floor a boy looking enough like himself to be his twin brother, bound precisely as he had been bound, and, what was stranger still, dressed in clothes of the same cut and color as his own.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VILLAIN AT VILLAINOUS WORK.

OF course the boy discovered by Billy Horton was none other than our young friend, Joe Willshire.

We all understand that.

Nor is it necessary to go into any elaborate explanation of Joe's presence a captive in the cellar of the mysterious house in the grove.

George Carter and the coachman had proved too much for him.

They had knocked him insensible and carried him inside.

So much for Joe Willshire.

Now how about Miss Susie Jones?

Certainly Joe had no chance to find out.

When he saw the girl he loved unconscious and in the power of George Carter, he flew at the fellow's throat like a tiger.

Since in the fight which ensued there were two against one, poor Joe was not left the ghost of a chance.

Joe was brave but injudicious.

Not only had he failed to rescue Susie from her captors, but he had placed it out of his power to help her later on.

Now, the way in which Susie Jones happened to fall into the hands of her rejected lover was this:

Pat Doyle, her father's coachman, was but a tool of Carter's, and had been hired by that individual to report the girl's every move.

While Miss Jones was at Mr. Pullen's house talking with the detective, George Carter had chanced to pass.

That was the beginning of it.

The end happened later, when, just at dusk, Susie left the house of her married friend on the West Side and entered her carriage.

"Drive home, Patrick," had been the girl's order.

Instead of obeying, the treacherous Doyle drove away out on Western avenue, then turned, and, lashing his horses into a run, never stopped until far beyond Humboldt park.

Now, although Susie had become aware that something was wrong long before the carriage stopped, she was unable to help herself.

When she called to Patrick, he refused to answer her.

To leap from the carriage at the speed they were going meant death, or at best broken limbs.

They stopped at last, however, as has been said, and before Susie had time to open the carriage door it was opened for her on the outside and George Carter leaped in.

Then the carriage started off again at the same rapid pace as before.

This was the way George Carter managed it, and a meaner, a more treacherous act was never performed.

Then Susie would have leaped from the carriage, notwithstanding the speed they were making, but she could not.

Carter flung his arm around her and held her fast. At last the unhappy girl comprehended her situation.

Still she bravely managed to control herself. She did not even scream.

"Mr. Carter, unhand me instantly!"

"Not until you have promised to marry me, Susie," the contemptible fellow replied.

"I shall never give you any such promise."

"Then you will never return to your home. Listen. I know what you have been up to to-day, and it won't work. I shall not harm you in any way. I love you too well for that, but escape from my power you shall not, until you have promised to be my wife."

When Susie struggled George Carter held her.

When she screamed for help—and thoroughly alarmed she did this at last—he pressed a handkerchief saturated with chloroform to her nose, and reduced her to that state of insensibility in which Joe Willshire beheld her as Carter and the coachman bore her toward the house in the grove.

Now, if ever there was a more dastardly deed than this perpetrated in a civilized community we would like to know it.

It was likewise as stupid as it was mean; for how could Carter expect that a young lady, so shamefully treated, would ever consent to become his wife?

The fact was George Carter was not only a villain but a fool.

Had he been anything short of this he would have never acted as he did.

He did not, however, disturb Susie again by his presence that night.

When the captive girl recovered consciousness she found herself within a comfortably furnished room, being cared for by a hideous old hag, whose name—so the woman informed her—was Mrs. McGrool.

"So you have come to, me pretty pet!" were the first words of the woman. "I was afeard them drugs had been too much fer ye—I was, indeed. It is a shame to use you so."

"Will you help me to escape, then?" demanded Susie eagerly. "My father will reward you well, and——"

"No, no, I'm afeard to try it."

"But you need have no fear. You can go with me. My father will see that no harm comes to you."

"No, no," repeated the woman again. "I couldn't do it even if I would. We should never get beyond the gate alive."

Then Susie began to realize her desperate situation.

She sank back upon the bed and closed her eyes wearily.

What to do was more than she could tell.

When she opened her eyes again—and this was some moments later—Mrs. McGrool had gone.

Slowly the hours of the night dragged past.

The silence of the room remained undisturbed.

The silence, however, was confined to the room itself.

In other parts of this strange mansion there was noise enough to wake the dead.

The poundings, hammerings, sawings, filings, etc., heard by Billy Horton and Joe Willshire in the cellar were heard also by Susie Jones on the floor above.

To the captive girl the sounds seemed nearer, seemed, in fact, as though proceeding from the room beyond.

Once the effect of the drug she had inhaled wore off, Susie began to look about her to try if possible to effect her escape.

She realized fully that she had fallen into the hands of Joe Willshire's most bitter enemy.

Now that the full measure of baseness of George Carter's character was made plain to her, Susie hated him more than ever before.

That to force from her consent of marriage Carter would attempt to ruin Joe Willshire, Susie felt certain.

She little dreamed that Joe at that very moment was separated from her only by the floor on which she stood.

When Susie began the work of exploring her prison in good earnest she had no idea what time it was.

Hours had elapsed since her capture, but the bewildered girl had failed to reckon them.

There was a light in the room. A dingy old lamp furnished that.

Susie, rising from the bed, took up the lamp and carefully examined doors and windows, only to find them fastened on the outer side. Just then the noise increased about her.

There was a tremendous racket going on on the other side of one of the doors of her prison—there were two—the one which seemed to open at the foot of her bed into another room.

Sounds of shuffling feet—sounds of clanking chains.

Creaking sounds, groaning sounds, and then, all of a sudden, came hootings, as though from a chorus of owls.

It was altogether a horrible din, and it made poor Susie tremble.

What was about to happen?

It sounded like Bedlam let loose.

But, though trembling, the brave girl maintained her courage.

For this Chicago girls are famous.

It is said that not only are they the prettiest, but the bravest, the most self-possessed girls in the world.

Determined to learn the meaning of all these strange sounds, Susie Jones crept toward the inner door, having first taken the precaution to so place the lamp that no light would be thrown upon her own graceful form.

Then, stooping, she applied her eye to the key-hole, through which light from behind shot in one thin bar.

Position once gained, Susie could see all that was transpiring within the room plainly.

Her amazement will be better understood when we describe the strange vision which burst upon her astonished gaze.

It was a large square room, bare of furniture, uncarpeted, and with walls thick with dirt and grime.

In the center of the room was an open trap door, on either side

of which stood six unearthly beings, whose appearance was well calculated to strike terror even to the bravest soul.

Were they men, or were they beasts or birds?

Men so far as the lower portions of their bodies were concerned—men dressed in long coats of inky blackness, the tails of which swept the floor.

Their heads were hideous.

Each was the head of a gigantic owl, having in the forehead a tiny light which shone with intense brilliancy, shedding weird radiance upon the surrounding scene.

Now, although this was quite enough, it was not all.

Before Susie had time to recover from her astonishment, there came a rattling sound, mingled with a deafening hooting from the twelve owls.

Then from out of the blackness of the trap there slowly rose a small platform of wood upon which stood two young men, bound back to back, each as his head came above the line of the trap gazing at the six owls before him in terror and surprise.

Susie could scarce repress a cry of amazement, and no wonder.

In itself the scene upon which she gazed was strange enough, but there was something stranger still.

The faces of the captives were precisely alike.

Not only their faces, but their dress as well.

It was the face of Joe Willshire duplicated.

There were two Joes instead of one.

CHAPTER IX.

JOE AND BILLY FIND THEMSELVES IN AN UGLY FIX.

"FOR gracious sake who are you?"

"And you? I might ask the same question?"

"If we were twin brothers we couldn't look more exactly alike."

When Billy Horton, penetrating the partition in the cellar, found himself in the presence of Joe Willshire, these were the exclamations which ensued.

To accomplish the release of Joe was but the work of a moment.

Fortunately, Billy had a few matches about him as we have stated. It was by the faint light thus furnished that his work was done.

"Don't light another," whispered Joe. "We may need them. Look here, I must know who you are and all about you. To have a fellow who is your living image suddenly pop in on one in this fashion fairly takes one's breath away."

Well, Billy told him.

Told all that had happened that night in a few brief words.

Joe returned the confidence.

When the boys came to put their stories together there seemed but one conclusion to be drawn.

They were brothers.

Every circumstance went to prove that this must be the truth.

Brothers, and sons of Herbert Horton, the counterfeiter.

It was this which weighed most heavily on their minds.

"Joe, we are in a terrible fix."

It was Billy Horton who spoke.

"Terrible, indeed," was the answer, "but the most dreadful part of it all is the thought that Susie Jones, whom I love more than life itself, is concealed somewhere in this house, and at the mercy of this villainous band."

"Joe, we must save that girl."

"If we don't, Billy, I have no wish to live."

"What do you propose?"

"I hardly know. There must be a way out of this place. If one of us could manage to escape and summon the police, the other could remain ready to fight for Susie if worse came to worse before help arrived."

"That must be me."

"Not at all. I am the one to stay."

"Would it be easy to find a policeman at this hour away out here?"

"I doubt it. If we should be so fortunate as to find a way to escape you must hurry to the house of Mr. Pullen, the detective, and demand his help. He lives on Fulton street just back of the car stables. It is only a few moments' walk, and you could cover the distance in no

suppose Mr. Pullen should not be at home?"

"In that case I don't know what you would do, but the first thing is to explore our prison. You haven't a pistol or a knife about you, I suppose."

"Nothing but the little penknife I used in cutting the cords."

"That is good for nothing in case of an emergency."

"I agree with you."

"It is very unfortunate, and I am no better off myself. But come, we are losing time. I think you had better light another match."

"Pst—fizz!"

The match was lit.

Together the boys crept about the cellar, their eyes moving rapidly in search of some possible means of escape.

There were a great many boxes and barrels scattered about the cellar, but no time was wasted in exploring them.

Billy spied it first and he called Joe's attention to the door.

Just then the match went out. Billy lighted another.

Then he tried to open the door.

It was as they had feared.

The door was securely fastened on the outside.

There was no other visible means of exit on that side of the partition.

The boys passed through the opening made by Billy in removing the boards, and began an exploration of that portion of the cellar which lay on the other side.

Here another door was discovered.

Again as they moved toward it the match went out.

At the same moment the pounding sound which Billy had previously noticed was renewed.

It sounded as though some one were working a small printing press.

The noise seemed to proceed from the other side of the door.

"What do you make of it?" whispered Billy. "There's something going on inside there, that's certain."

"Yes," answered Joe, "and if sounds go for anything, that something is the counterfeiters at their work."

"But it wasn't so while I lay here."

"Probably they have just begun. See, there is a light in there. You can just get a glimpse of it through the crack in the door. Come on, Billy, this must be looked into before we make another move."

Following his companion, Billy crept toward the door, and tried to peer through the crack.

Useless effort!

While wide enough to admit the passage of light, the crack was still too narrow to admit of anything being seen in the room beyond.

Whispering to Joe to maintain perfect silence, Billy moved along a foot or two, knelt beside the door, and began to feel for the key-hole.

Presently he found it.

Since not a ray of light was admitted by the key-hole, Billy came to the conclusion that it was stopped up with something—possibly a piece of old rag.

Producing his knife, he thrust the blade into the opening.

Something dropped on the inside, and out shot the light.

Meanwhile the noise had continued.

It was like the clank of machinery, and came at brief and regular intervals.

When Billy applied his eye to the key-hole the secret of the sounds was instantly disclosed.

Within stood two men, one working at some sort of a press, which the other turned by means of a handle which formed part of a wheel.

A lamp burned on a table near the press, and Billy could see spread out about it piles upon piles of newly printed bank bills.

It was just at this instant that the unfortunate event transpired.

Joe did it.

He had inadvertently leaned against two loose boards which stood upright against the cellar wall.

Down fell the boards with a resounding crash which brought Billy to his feet at once.

It brought the two counterfeiters to a knowledge of what was transpiring likewise.

Even before the boys had time to beat a retreat the door was flung open, and two men with drawn revolvers sprang upon them.

"Hold on there, you young scoundrel!" cried the foremost, in whom Billy instantly recognized the man who had given him the box.

"Hold on or I'll blow your brains out! I've heard of your doings. A pretty way you botched up my errand. There got to be a stop put to your prying, and as for this fellow— Hello! What's all this? If you fellows ain't twin brothers I'll eat my shirt!"

At this instant the deep tones of a gong sounded.

"Ding! Ding!"

A cord had been pulled by Jim's companion, which brought George Carter upon the scene at once.

"Ha! What is this?" he exclaimed. "Joe Willshire, but for your meddling interference I might have spared you. As for this other young cub he need expect no mercy. They have seen all, Jim!"

"Bet yer life, George."

"What do you say?"

"I say summon the owls and let us dispose of them. It is unsafe now to let them live, whatever ideas we may have had before."

"You are right," returned Carter. "Stubbs, you bind them back to back. Jim summon the owls in the council chamber while I get ready the trap."

Protestations were useless.

At the point of the pistol Billy and Joe were bound in the manner indicated and placed upon a sort of platform, pulled down by Carter from the ceiling above.

Before this they had been gagged again.

Even had there been any use in such a proceeding, there was no possibility of calling for help, or even venturing any further appeal.

At a sign from Carter a cord was pulled, and the trap moved slowly upward.

As it rose above the floor line overhead the boys, standing bound back to back, beheld before them, ranged in rows of six, strange beings with lights in their foreheads.

Beings with men's bodies, but whose heads were the heads of owls.

CHAPTER X.

WHICH IS ALSO THE LAST.

TROUBLES, at their worst to all outward seeming, are oftentimes nearest their end.

In this instance to all outward seeming, Susie Jones' fix was a most desperate one.

And yet, had the much tried girl but known it, the end was very near.

As Susie, kneeling before the dividing door, strained her eyes in the vain effort to distinguish her lover from his companion in trial, the trap door shot into its place.

It was now as though no opening existed.

Billy and Joe, as they remained upon the closed trap helpless, appeared to be standing upon floor planks as solid as in any part of the room.

"Too-hoot! Too-hoot! Too-hoot! Too-hoot!"

From twelve owl heads twelve hooting cries went up.

Then the ranks of six broke.

The owls circled about the captives.

One, about whose figure there was something to remind Susie of her enemy, George Carter, separated himself from the rest, and, approaching Billy and Joe, spoke aloud:

"Brothers, we have before us two spies—what is your pleasure? Shall we smother them and throw them into the lime kilns, or shall—"

"I think," spoke up one of the owls, "that it would be better if Brother Carter—"

"Hush! Hush!" whispered hoarsely the owl who had first spoken from beneath his mask—for masks these owl heads certainly were. "Why speak names? You forget that there are ears in the room adjoining which even now may be listening. You forget—"

"No, I don't forget," retorted the second owl. "I have a splendid memory, and there's just the trouble. I want to ask the brother by what right he has made use of the rendezvous of our secret band for his own private purposes? It is entirely against our rules to introduce a woman into this house, and yet this is just what he has done. I, for one, say if there is any killing to be done that woman must die, too."

George Carter—his owl disguise can hide him from the reader no longer—stamped his foot in rage.

"I say no!" he shouted. "I am the captain, and I have a right to do as I please in these matters. These boys are the two sons of old Horton whose escape from Joliet has put our very existence in peril. Fate has thrown them into our hands and they must die. As for the girl in yonder room she is to be my wife. I have a bullet ready here for the first man who offers to harm a hair of her head."

"Brethren," spoke a deep-voiced owl from the one corner, "we must not quarrel. The brother has spoken truly. We have captured Herbert Horton, he is wounded and dying. His sons must also die. As for the girl—"

"As for the girl I propose to have her out of that room. The owls shall decide her fate by ballot, but she must be present and—"

Crack! crack!

Two shots rang out within the room.

Mad with rage, George Carter flourished his smoking revolver, while the Owl who had dared to oppose him fell lifeless to the floor.

For an instant all stood motionless.

Then as though by common consent four of the Owls sprang upon Carter, only to be met by others, who seemed to have arrived at an equally speedy decision to side with their chief.

The din was horrible.

Pistol shots were fired, deep execrations breathed.

It was a strange and weird sight to behold that combat between the owl-like forms of the counterfeiters, and the flashing headlights attached to their singular masks made it stranger still.

Poor Susie, who feared more for her lover than herself, was fairly frantic.

She could look quietly on no longer.

Springing to her feet the brave girl vainly tried to open the door, hoping that her sudden appearance in the midst of the *melee* might at least save Joe.

"Hist! miss! hist! We are here to save you!"

So fearful had been the din that Susie had not heard the noise at the window.

Had she done this and turned her head, she would have beheld the entrance of the squad of police, led by Mr. Pullen, who had effected an entrance by means of the window at the end of the room.

Coming upon her thus suddenly the sight was too much for the overwrought girl, and she sank in a dead faint to the floor.

Mr. Pullen, bending over, tenderly raised her and placed her upon the bed.

Not a word was spoken, nor could words have been distinguished.

Crash! Bang!

Down went the door, yielding to pressure from the shoulders of six stalwart officers who dashed into the midst of the astounded Owls.

"Surrender, scoundrel!" shouted Mr. Pullen, springing toward George Carter, from whose face the mask had fallen. "Your race is run! As sure as there is a heaven above us you shall receive reward for your many—"

Here Mr. Pullen stopped abruptly.

There was a sudden crash.

The room rang with a resounding cry.

Down before the eyes of all sank the secret trap, bearing upon it George Carter into the darkness below.

* * * * *

It is seldom the police make so clean a haul as was made by Mr. Pullen and his men that night at the house in the grove.

That it was accomplished without a struggle was due entirely to the falling of the trap which bore George Carter to his death.

Before the Owls could recover from their astonishment they were securely handcuffed and their masks torn off.

Two had been killed outright; three others lay badly wounded upon the floor.

Billy and Joe were released by Mr. Pullen, and in a moment were at Susie's side.

Thus terminated the career of the secret band of Chicago, for before morning dawned the living Owls were safely lodged in jail.

The house was searched.

Counterfeit money and counterfeiters' tools were discovered, together with dozens of owl disguises, and so the secret of the mysterious house was fully explained.

George Carter was discovered dying in the cellar.

The old man from the cave was found lying severely wounded in a room above.

Mr. Pullen called carriages and sent Susie Jones under the charge of Joe to her father's house, while Billy and the old man were removed to his own house.

Now the end of this strange affair may be briefly stated.

Though severely wounded, the old man from the cave was still able to speak.

Long before Mr. Pullen's house was reached, Billy Horton knew all the old man had to tell.

It will cause no surprise to learn that this unfortunate person was none other than Herbert Horton, the escaped convict—father of Billy and Joe.

To Mr. Pullen, who recognized him instantly, Mr. Horton declared his innocence, stating that after his escape from the Joliet Prison he had come to Chicago, resolved to bring the members of the secret band to justice and wipe the stain from his name.

And did he succeed in this?

Perhaps not by any exertion of his own, but George Carter's dying confession made all clear.

It was late on the following afternoon that the villain breathed his last, and before he died he thought best to free his mind.

No matter about the details.

They don't concern us.

Enough it is to state that Carter's confession not only showed Horton to be an innocent and much wronged man, but completely cleared Joe Willshire's name as well.

Then Banker Jones, deeply repenting his hasty accusation, took the matter in hand, and through his efforts every member of the secret band was finally brought to his deserts.

The "Twelve Owls," they called themselves, since such had originally been their number, though sentences were finally passed on eighteen members of this rascally band.

Lucky Mr. Pullen!

Not only did he receive a reward of long standing offered by the United States Government for the capture of the counterfeiters, but what was best of all, secured the appointment of chief of the Chicago detective staff.

And all this came about through his catching sight of the man Jim as he talked with Billy in the alley.

While Billy, following Jim's directions, took the box to the mysterious house, Mr. Pullen and his policemen followed Jim.

The upshot of it all was that Joe married Susie, became cashier of the Butchers' Bank, resigning his old place to Billy on the day the wedding bells rang.

Mr. Horton, now fully restored to health, lives first with one son then with the other.

So Billy's adventure with the box brought him a father and also a brother.

It also brought him a fine position and enabled him to marry Mr. Pullen's pretty daughter.

Taken all in all, we doubt if Billy Horton has ever regretted that night of perilous happening in the den of the 12 OWLS.

[THE END.]

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